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ABSTRACT

Newspaper journalists have difficulty experiencing much writing apprehension since fast deadlines makes these writers become comfortable with their raw copy. Such a sense of comfort and confidence are necessary for survival and success in the newspaper business. Writing research shows that writers produce better writing if the topic interests them, and most news writers develop a special field of interest. Beat reporters in the newsroom, for example, are usually assigned according to interest and knowledge. The process of writing, using multiple readers and drafts, does occur in the newsroom. Students, however, can become paralyzed by too many rules, making them unable to express their thoughts. Free writing of thoughts is often practiced by editorial writers. In short, the work habits of journalists, whose jobs forbid writing apprehension, are good examples of how to keep student apprehension to a minimum. (HB)

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Writing Apprehension and Professional and Non-Professional Writing

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Writing Apprehension in Professional and Non-Professional Writing:

It is difficult to be a newspaper journalist and have much writing apprehension. Because of the speed necessary for daily publication, the stories that appear in a paper are often little more than carefully-edited first drafts. This lack of time for fine tuning deadline work forces writers to have a high degree of comfort with their raw copy.

That comfort and confidence is necessary to survive in the journalism business. To last, a journalist must quickly become familiar with his/ her beat and translate that knowledge into speedy and efficient writing. When that quick comfort does not come, it can often mean a change in careers. Even in my brief experience, I have seen several would-be journalists leave the field because they are frustrated by not being able to hold onto their work until they are sure it is perfect.

I have noticed most veteran journalists derive a great deal of security in writing from their assigned beat. Over time they learn enough about a subject to have confidence writing about it. This specific comfort zone is evident when a writer is asked to do something outside that beat.

For me, the apprehensive writing areas are crime and trial stories. Not only am I unfamiliar with many terms and procedures, I have a legitimate worry I will libel someone in ignorance.

Other writers pale when asked to compose something scientific, or an engaging feature. We are comfortable writing about the subjects we are well read and experienced with, but full of apprehension when we have to venture into the unknown.

This common newsroom experience makes the articles of this module ring true to me, as the experiences of the students are not so different from ours in a professional writing arena.

The Comfort Zone:

Since newspaper journalists must have low enough writing apprehension to defeat writer's block in a blip of the computer screen, I found our newsroom an interesting source of comparison and contrast when reading the module articles.

One of the most obvious similarities is the connection between familiarity and interest and writing success. This concept is discussed in Norma Decker Collins' module lecture.

"Most writers benefit from writing about what they know and about topics in which they have an interest. According to writing researcher Donald Graves (1983), topic selection is directly related to the quality of writing that students produce. Students who choose topics of personal interest are likely to begin writing, sustain writing and improve writing in ways that are not possible when they are detatched from their topic."

The comfort and productivity a familiar and enjoyable subject lends to students' writing is also evident in the newsroom. Beats are often assigned based on a reporter's background education and experience and personal interests. Interest and experience make the ultimate writing combination. A journalist who covers every school board meeting in the county, or every environmental issue, can quickly get up to speed on the ins and outs of that beat.

The reporter for each beat is such an expert on his/her area, that any background information is easy to access and assimilate into late-breaking news. This condition is similar to Decker Collins' theory students can write great material about something as personally well-known as a favorite place to visit.

In journalism, that expert status is further seen when editors call on beat reporters to clarify information and make predictions about upcoming story needs. That kind of shared authorship is also a great source of writing comfort. More than one person is involved in the writing process, thus insuring a literary and libel safety net for all.

The same, multi-level process is seen in Decker Collins' description of the writing process.

"Students who operate under the one, 'right' draft mentality are likely to avoid writing. Few of us can sit down and compose an error-free, concise and well-focused document in one attempt. Teachers must help students understand that writing, as an act of composition, is complex, messy and often difficult."

In the same way reporters and editors compose in shared authorship, student writers must work through their writing in some kind of leveled process. But, in the real world of writing, how the levels and steps are accomplished is in the end up to no one but the writer.

"There are no universal prescriptions for good writing, and students who have been misled into thinking that there are -- who presume that the extraordinarily complex process of creating written discourse can be reduced to a series of hard and fast rules, to some sort of algorithm -- are prime candidates for writer's block."

So reads the rule breaking/making theory of Lawrence J. Oliver Jr.'s "Helping Students Overcome Writer's Block."

He contends some students become so paralyzed by "rules," like outlines and mechanics, they are unable to express their thoughts. He believes too many frustrated student writers are trying to edit as they compose.

Similar writing theory is seen in Cynthia L. Selfe's "The Predrafting Processes of Four High- and Four Low-Apprehension Writers."

Selfe found students who were low apprehension were following an internal set of writing "rules" for sensibly flowing content. This idea is shown in a discussion with a successful student writer about how he planned his essay.

"I realized I was going to be talking to high school students, so I thought I'd start talking about the transition from high school to college. And then, rather than start talking about study habits in college, you know, right after that, I though I'd start talking about differences between high school and college."

While this student was globally planning the paper from the start, the high-apprehension students were stalling in locally planning perfect opening words.

In the newsroom, I find what at first appears to be a contradiction to the success rate of these planning models. Most writers I know say, "When the lead (sentence) is finally right, the whole story flows from there."

Although these writers may seem to be locally planning, I believe what is happening is really global planning. When the story is thoroughly planned in the author's mind enough to compose the intitially-strong lead needed for high-speed publishing -- global and local planning are happening simultaneously.

There are two other comfort-inducing writing techniques in the module that are commonly used in the newsroom.

Free writing of thoughts, as described by Decker Collins and Oliver, is frequently practiced in writing editorials. I keep whole files of my randomly jotted opinions about various issues as kindling for future columns.

Another technique is the "ear editing" described in Kathi O. Silver's "The Extended Conference: A Technique to Encourage Writing." Our newsroom often has a low murmur of voices near deadline, as writers check the "sound" of their copy.

Apprehensive Territory:

Because writing outside a known beat is often what strikes feat in the heart of seasoned writers, I found Jeri Pfeifer's "What Happens to Writing Apprehension in a Reading Class," especially interesting.

"It is evident from the relationships identified between reading and writing apprehension in this study that reading ability contributes to lower

apprehension and that lack of reading ability contributes to higher apprehension, which, in turn, keeps anxious writers from effective writing. ...It logically follows that pleasure in writing can be derived from pleasure in reading; writing apprehension is reduced as reading skills amass."

It may also follow that journalists nervous about writing something different could lower their apprehension by reading good examples of work written in that style or subject area. It might pay editors to keep a file of pieces to share with writers struggling to find a new voice.

Conclusion:

The work habits of journalists, whose jobs forbid writing apprehension, are good examples of how to keep apprehension to a minimum. Their sporadic apprehension shows no matter how seasoned the writer, writing is a craft that is never quite mastered.

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* Articles with incomplete references can be found in the Writing As a Response to Reading Education L530 Study Guide, Indiana University Bloomington, 1991.